

Big City Benefits in Thailand's Royal Resort Town

By Kirsten Raccuia

Small frothy waves slowly recede from the light tan sand while the colourful parachutes of kiteboards fly overhead. A man in a cowboy hat walks his horse, hoping someone will ask for a ride. I'm sitting in Beach Café Restaurant, drinking fresh coconut water right from the coconut (\$2.60) and taking it all in.

This is Hua Hin, Thailand's Royal Town. It's on the Gulf of Thailand and only a three-hour drive south of Bangkok, depending on traffic. A high-speed train from Bangkok to Hua Hin has been approved and building is slated to start this year. It will take three years to complete and when finished will cut the journey from Bangkok down to one hour.

Hua Hin became popular in the 1920s when King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) and King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) built summer palaces here to escape the humidity of Bangkok. Much of the nobility followed suit and built their homes here as well.

Today the city is home to about 85,000 people, so it's big enough to have all the modern conveniences you need but laidback enough to retain its beach vibe. The shallow green waters and just the perfect amount of wind make it one of the top locations for kiteboarding in the country. A day at the beach can be as adventurous as you'd like it to be. There are a few kiteboarding schools ready at a moment's notice to get your adrenaline pumping; at [Kite Boarding Asia](#), a full day course is \$150. If lounging is more your speed, the broad, five-kilometre long beach is perfect for that too. But beyond the beach is a lively city just waiting to be explored.

Expats from all over the world live here. A good number of them are Scandinavians, French and Swiss, which gives this city a charming European flair, not to mention fantastic international food.

There are two main streets. Phetkasem Road runs parallel to the beach and is lined with shopping plazas, markets, restaurants, hotels and apartments. Damnoen Kasem Road runs perpendicular to it from the beautiful traditional Thai train station to the beach.

Check out the Cicada Market where the focus is on handmade goods, live music and local eats. I stopped by the Wop Station Bar for their specialty blueberry cocktail (\$4.50), before wandering through the lanes of handmade wooden spectacles, housewares and clothes. I bought some wooden coasters, ate some pad Thai (\$2.50) and saw a young boy getting his mohawk trimmed by a tattooed barber wearing a bowler hat. Hua Hin is an artsy community and the city celebrates and fosters art co-ops and markets around town.

Tucked away off these main arteries are little side streets, or *sois*, where you'll find small bars, eateries, shops and more. It's easy to get lost in these *sois* and that's usually when you stumble upon a



The royal beach town of Hua Hin became popular in the 1920s.

hidden gem. Wandering through the *sois* is exactly how I found the [Saxophone Lounge](#), a wonderful place for nightly live jazz, blues or soul music and a glass of wine.

Hua Hin is a golfer's paradise with seven courses nearby and year-round temperatures that average between 26 C and 30 C, meaning you can play as often as you like. Black Mountain is the top-rated course in Asia and requires that you hire a caddy.

Mike Brown, an expat that loves to golf, enjoys having the caddy. He says, "They know the course really well. It is almost like having a private coach. They get to know my swing and tell me to shoot for the coconut tree. If I can get close to it, I'll be close to the green."

There is a thriving expat community in Hua Hin with loads of activities to join. The [Hua Hin Golf Society](#) meets twice a week for rounds of golf and beer. The [Hash House Harriers](#) are a self-described "drinking club with a running problem" so if running is your thing and you don't take it so seriously, this group could be for you.

Beach Living for \$2,000 a Month or Less

Life in Hua Hin can be very affordable. You can rent a one-bedroom apartment five minutes from the beach for as little as \$570 per month, leaving you plenty left over for extras like a maid—only \$12 for a half-day—and a massage for \$11. Fast home internet is around \$20 and a mobile plan with 4G is only \$10, so the essentials in life are pretty cheap. Even a haircut with a proper shave is only \$4.50.

Mike moved here a few years ago and only spends \$800 per

"Hua Hin is a golfer's paradise."

month, excluding his mortgage. But that does include all his food and drinks, one massage per week, one round of golf per week, health insurance, electricity, phone, Pay TV and internet.

For the best local produce check out the markets. They're not just the best way to get the freshest local fruit and veggies, but it's also the perfect way to save money. Tesco, inside the Market Village shopping centre in the heart of town, and Makro, only a 15-minute drive away, are the main grocery stores in Hua Hin. They have a mix of local and international products as well as homewares. There are plenty of specialty international grocery stores like Villa Market, with all the imported goods you might miss from home.

There are hundreds of restaurants to choose from at all price points. Take your pick from Spanish tapas at [Cool Breeze](#), Japanese at Hagi or French at Orchids. Of course, there are also the fantastic Thai restaurants like [Moonsmile](#). With about eight tables, it's always packed with locals and expats and you'll only spend \$7 for a massive plate of sizzling beef noodles and a beer.

For even cheaper—but equally delicious—Thai food head to the night markets scattered throughout town where you can find coconut green curry and spicy pad Thai among the traditional dishes available. The markets are definitely the best places to keep your wallet and your stomach full.

The great thing about Hua Hin is that you don't need a car or a scooter to get around. There are *songthaews* (trucks) kitted out with two rows of seats and a roof, that run everywhere throughout the city for about 50 cents per ride locally.

Rentals from \$570

Hua Hin has an abundance of housing options. Rentals run the gamut from modern apartments to pool villas and everything in between. I saw mansions that rent for \$5,000-plus a month and one-bedroom apartments for \$570 per month.

If you want to live on a golf course with all its lavish amenities—pool, restaurants, tennis courts, a fitness centre—and don't mind living about 25 minutes away from Hua Hin, you can find a furnished, three-bedroom apartment for only \$1,330 a month. Or

for the same amount you can be in the heart of the city, just a few hundred metres to the beach, in a fully furnished, two-bedroom apartment with a shared pool, private balcony and parking.

If you decide to rent a home with a pool and a garden, the maintenance fees are usually around \$95 per month for each, unless you are lucky enough to have a landlord that takes care of that for you.

A fully furnished, four-bedroom villa—with a pool—in a gated community, only 10 minutes away from the city centre, can be found for \$1,300 per month. And a simply furnished three-bedroom townhouse, with a shared pool in an expat area, goes for a monthly rent of \$823.

Rents can be even cheaper if you don't need a pool; a two-bedroom home five minutes from Hua Hin is only \$575 per month. But like all things in Thailand, remember to negotiate your rent. What they quote you isn't necessarily what the final price really is.

To find your perfect home in Hua Hin, check out Facebook pages and forums to get an idea of what's going on in town. Try [Hua Hin Expats](#), [Hua Hin & Cha-am Expats](#) and the [Hua Hin Buy & Sell Official](#) page. The [Hua Hin Forum](#)

is a wealth of information about all things Hua Hin, with every topic under the sun covered, from property to nightlife and visas to healthcare.

Royal Healthcare Standards at Affordable Prices

There are three major hospitals here, but the one most frequented by expats and sometimes even by the Royal Family, is the Bangkok Hospital, which is internationally accredited by the JCI, the gold standard for worldwide healthcare.

"It's not only super-efficient; I was totally comfortable every step of the way. They explained everything they were doing in detail, in perfect English, and had great compassion for me as well. It's not like that back home," says Mike, who was treated for bronchitis. "And, the whole visit, including three medications was only \$53." ■

"Get a furnished, three-bedroom townhouse for \$823 per month."

Three Outdoor Adventures Around Hua Hin

Kui Buri National Park is the best destination in Thailand for wild elephant spotting. With more than 320 elephants roaming the area, it's not hard to find the gentle giants. Golden jackals, leopards, deer, langurs (monkeys) and various species of birds can also be seen in the park. It's open for wildlife safaris from 2 p.m. until sunset, when the herd are most active. You can use a tour company, like [Tontan Travel](#) in Hua Hin, that will drive you the one-and-a-half hours to the park and guide you once inside. Those tours start at \$120 for one person or \$150 per couple—the more people in your

group, the lower the price.

The **Pala-U waterfall** in the [Kaeng Krachan National Park](#) is considered one of the tallest falls in Thailand. It's near the Burma border and one-and-a-half-hours drive west of Hua Hin through pineapple plantations and the undulating green countryside. The multi-tiered, 16-level cascade is in the middle of untouched rainforest heaving with wildlife. The higher the level, the more arduous the climb and you must use ropes in some areas to help you ascend. The entrance fee to the park is \$15, and be sure to wear water shoes.

Ever wanted to try your hand at **squid**

fishing? Go out with a local fisherman just before dark so you can get a bird's eye view of the sunset. As the moon shines, the squid come out to feed. The boats are equipped with a bright green light that attracts them to the surface, making them easy to catch. You might be able to catch red snapper and small grouper to add variety to your dinner plate. After fishing time is over, head over to the mainland for a barbecue to enjoy the fruits of your labour. The more you catch, the more you eat. Prices start at \$90 and can be booked through various tour operators in town.